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ABSTRACT

Today's inclusion of semantics within the overall language design offers proof against the earlier mistaken view that semantics was irrelevant to the study of language. Sociolinguistics have reassessed language as a social matrix that encompasses the sum of linguistic variation present in a given community. Variability in language is described by sociolinguistic rules which specify the grammatical options a speaker may actually select, given a number of conditions. Common to these formulations is the notion of constraints--factors that may or may not prevent a speaker from making a certain linguistic decision. Sociolinguistics has a far reaching consequence for English instruction in our schools, bringing to our attention the idea of a cultural-linguistic continuum. No longer can the teacher's goal be that all children should speak alike. New educational goals should be subsumed under one main objective: the acquisition of communicative competence. Teachers must have the ability to assess unemotionally the nature of speech varieties that children bring to school and to recognize the value of code shifting within everyday speech events. (HOD)

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The Notion of Variability: English Language Performance in a Sociolinguistic Framework

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The complexity of language has often led investigators to limit their scope of research and to falsely rationalize this limitation as an intended exclusion of all that which is extraneous to the scientific treatment of language. Recent developments in sociolinguistics however reveal, because of its emphasis on language in its social context, a much bolder strategy in this respect and the strong focus on linguistic heterogeneity as a reflection of social diversity is indicative of such a trend. These new developments do not only represent a reinterpretation of linguistic concerns based on a broader scope but seem to be of greater significance than the findings in abstract linguistics, particularly for the English teacher whose interest has always been the actual context in which language operates.

It is the objective of the present paper to discuss some of the findings that sociolinguists have made public in recent years and speculate on the extent to which these findings could be relevant to the English teacher in order for her to adjust her teaching strategies to a societally more realistic framework.

0. Many of us may still remember some of the arguments advanced by structuralists to the effect that meaning should be disregarded if the study of language were ever to qualify as a science. The inclusion of meaning, so they argued, would require that we cope with man's entire universe of experience, a condition which was not only felt to go beyond the linguist's capacities but to be irrelevant to any rigorous treatment of language phenomena. This anti-semantic and non-mentalistic attitude embraced by most structuralists served the purpose of rationalizing why linguistics was excluding from its scope some very

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important aspects of language study. This wilful exclusion of the study of meaning, during almost two decades of American linguistics, reminds us of similar attitudes among earlier as well as later investigators. Saussure and his followers, for example, despite their awareness of the fact that language is a social phenomenon, did the groundwork for later studies that would focus only on its individual aspect, such that what had been recognized as being a social reality was explored only within the individual. Labov (1972:186) has brought this "Saussurian Paradox" to our attention while trying to justify that a new approach to language analysis, one that was socially more realistic, was badly needed. More recently, the transformationalist likewise disregarded the social perspective. Whereas for the structuralist, it was through language use that the individual becomes the depositary of socially valid linguistic norms, for the transformationalist it is through his intuition that he shares with every other native speaker these same norms. This intuition is not an overtly observable phenomenon and therefore, for it to qualify as a criterion in linguistic analysis, the researcher had to aim at a far more deeply-rooted knowledge about language, a faculty he labeled "competence."

Whether actual language use or mere linguistic intuition, it was the individual who determined the sum of linguistic behaviors present in a given speech community. Language, to be sure, is a very complex human phenomenon and it seems that this complexity has often led scholars to falsely rationalize, merely

because they were not yet capable of handling certain of its aspects, that these aspects were irrelevant to the study of language. Today's inclusion of semantics within the overall language design offers the proof for the earlier mistaken view and so does the reassessment of language by sociolinguists as a social matrix that encompasses the sum of linguistic variation present in a given community.

1. If the social aspect of language, that is, that which is common to all speakers of a given speech community, could be determined individually, merely because each individual is, by definition, a member of a speech community and if this internal social knowledge of his language is the speaker's intuition, as Chomsky and his associates have claimed, then native speakers within such a community should largely share the intuitive judgments regarding the language they speak. Guy Carden (1973) has recently shown that speakers do in many instances not share the same intuition, especially when semantic interpretations are at issue. Labov (1972:199), after discussing Carden's findings, reaches a similar conclusion and argues that "the search for homogeneity in intuitive judgments is a failure" (ibid.). He elaborates elsewhere in the same paper (1972:191) that

> when Chomsky first made the explicit proposal that the subject matter of linguistics be confined to the intuitive judgments of native speakers, he hoped that the great majority of these would be clear judgments (...). It was expected that the marginal cases, which were doubtful in the mind of the theorist and/or the native speaker, would be few in number and their grammatical status would be decided by rules formed from

> the clear cases. The situation has not worked out in this way, for it is difficult to find doubtful cases which have not remained problematical for the theory.

By rejecting both, the performance of a single individual as well as his intuition, as valid criteria to capture language in its social dimension, we are choosing the only alternative we have left, i.e., conceiving of language as the sum of individual behaviors, one superimposed on the other, yielding a continuum that stretches from the least monitored vernacular variety at one end to the educated regional (or supra-regional) standard in a given speech community at the other. It is unlikely that anyone would control the full range of the spectrum. Therefore, by referring in this way to the speaker of variety X, we are suggesting a different type of "ideal speaker-hearer," not one whose linguistic behavior is consistently homogeneous but rather one whose potential for variability is almost infinite. This now allows us to visualize the non-idealized, that is, the actual, speaker as one whose speech is inherently variable and who select these variables in agreement with the presence or absence of certain linguistic as well as non-linguistic factors.

2. No student of language has really ever questioned the fact that there is variation in language and I am not referring here merely to historical change. The question at issue was the extent to which variation could be studied in linguistics. The structuralist, for example, recognized structured variation at all levels of language, in the linear ordering of phonemes

(pit vs. tip) as well as in the ordering of words in phrases and sentences (watch pocket vs. pocket watch; John hit Mary vs. Mary hit John). On the other hand, the alternation between, say, the released and unreleased articulations of a final stop ([lip^{h}] vs. [lip^{7}]) or the initial vowel alternations in specific words ([ekanamiks] vs. (iykenamiks]) were merely instances of free variation and, hence, unaccountable for. To the transformationalist, free variation was likewise of little concern and he would throw all instances of free variation into the wastebasket of performance. Free variation, he would argue, was a result of the presence of certain extralinguistic factors which accounted for alternate performances of the same linguistic competence. Stylistic variation, on the other hand, was captured to some extent, since the transformationalist allowed certain rules to be optional. Bruce Fraser (1972) has recently addressed himself to the distinction between obligatory and optional rules and his concern there for the optionality of some transformational rules resembles my own in that option implies variation and that the presence of optional rules in a transformational grammar represents the extent to which a competence-centered grammar is willing to admit that speakers do have choices available to them, even though the specification of the factors that trigger off these choices lies outside the scope of such a grammar. An optional rule, however, is only a reluctant admission of variability in language and, to quote Fraser (1972:4-5);

> what we can expect to find upon further examination

> of various dialects of English is not a sharp obligatory/optional differentiation of rule obligation, but a continuum of optionality, determined by the function of language.

If we agree with Fraser and understand optionality in this way, we have taken an important step, away from mere competence to also including performance criteria, whether these are or are not linguistically conditioned. In other words, we no longer think of variation as a competence phenomenon in terms of a grammatical rule that might or might not apply but rather as a performance phenomenon specifiable on the basis of a set of variables inherent in language use. Labov has proposed rules of this sort and called them variable rules in order to describe formally certain linguistic patterns in the Black English Vernacular (BEV) like the Consonant Cluster Reduction, the Copula Deletion, the Loss of Velarity in Present Participles and some Pro-forms and others. Although there may be no complete agreement in sociolinguistic quarters whether variation should be formalized in this or some other way, the variable rule is a definite advance over the earlier optional rule. Objections to it have been raised because of the recent emphasis on quantitative data and the close correlation between linguistic features and sociological variables but its strength in dealing with variation in an entirely new light can hardly be overlooked.

We may describe the various proposals tending to explore variability in language use as attempts of opposing to the conventional pure-linguistic rule, a sociolinguistic rule.

Whereas the former merely captures the knowledge that the speaker has concerning a given grammatical option, the latter specifies which option he may actually select, given a number of conditions. The rule of grammar has evolved into a rule of language.

Common to all sociolinguistic formulations is the notion of constraints. Inherent variability thus turns out to be the result of a series of constraining factors that may or may not prevent a speaker from making a certain linguistic decision. Some investigators have raised, in this very context, the question whether the variability in language has only synchronic implications or whether it should be interpreted as language change in progress, such that the presence of a linguistic variable is actually the starting point, through time and space, of an ongoing change. The supporter of the variable rule mostly see variation as bits of variable performance to be plotted in a linguistic-sociological matrix in which phonological, syntactic and lexical variables are correlated with sociological ones, such as, socio-economic grouping, age, sex, ethnicity and the like. Those who have made explicit their reservations regarding this solely synchronic approach are proposing a diachronic framework in which they investigate linguistic choice in relation to what this choice implies for other linguistic decisions that speakers must make and also in relation to the extent to which the presence of variable behavior reveals the direction that linguistic change is taking. Fasold (1970:551)

has recently defined Implicational Analysis, as this approach is called, and has argued that what implicationalists are seeking to show is that

> socially significant linguistic features occur in an implicational series such that the presence of some feature A in the speech of a certain individual means that the speaker will also be found to use features B, C and D. If A is absent but B is present, the C and D will also be present, and so on.

David DeCamp (1971[a]:36-37) has offered a number of interesting arguments in favor of implicational over quantitative studies and shown that the former approach is more compatible with the idea of a speech variety as a linguistic continuum (see above) but a more detailed discussion of the two sociolinguistic trends would go beyond the scope of the present paper.

3. A so pervasive change in the kind of analysis that sociolinguists have proposed cannot but have far-reaching consequence for the English instruction in our schools. Though it may still be too early to come forth with very specific proposals in this respect, it may be worth speculating on the direction that English language teaching might take if the new sociolinguistic framework is found to be superior, as I contend it is, to the earlier social-context-free approach. Among the many new notions that sociolinguists have brought to our attention, the idea of a cultural-linguistic continuum seems to be most suited to affect our attitude regarding the speech patterns of our students. Speech is inherently variable and code-shifting (see below), one of our most common strategies, hence, it should hardly surprise us that the sociolinguistic findings discussed

in the present paper are prone to affect at least some of the goals that we now enforce with respect to the desired language competency of our students. Let me therefore dwell a little further on the notion of a language continuum, its nature and its relationship to four specifics: speech variety, code-shifting, non-linguistic behavior and societal norms.

The idea of a speech continuum has come to us as the result of the work done by creolists like Stewart, Alleyne, Beryl Bailey, DeCamp and others. Unable to deal categorically with their informants' verbal performance, these scholars proposed that the speech patterns of creoles be perceived, in relation to the regional standard, as a spectrum stretching from the most vernacular variety, Stewart's basilect, to an approximation of the standard variety, the acrolect. Creolists who, like Stewart, sought, in addition, to apply these insights to the creole-based varieties in the United States, the Gullah Dialect as well as several non-standard forms of American English, found it quite feasible to also characterize these as speech continua. It now seems to be appropriate to conceive of language in general, whether standard or non-standard, along these same lines in view of the fact that such an interpretation is much more congruent with the variability in speech than was the former static model according to which two discrete linguistic systems, one, standard, and the other, non-standard, existed side by side. Let me return briefly to the Creole continuum. DeCamp (1971[b]:350) summarizes his research in Jamaican English

in these words:

> . . . in Jamaica there is no sharp cleavage between creole and standard. Rather there is a linguistic continuum, a continuous spectrum of speech varieties ranging from the 'bush talk' or 'broken language' of Quashie to the educated standard of Philip Sherlock and Norman Manley. Many Jamaicans persist in the myth that there are only two varieties: the patois and the standard. But one speaker's attempt at the broad patois may be closer to the standard end of the spectrum than is another speaker's attempt at the standard. . . . . Each Jamaican speaker commands a span of this continuum, the breadth of the span depending on the breadth of his social contacts; . . . . . .

Applied now to a non-Creole setting, English stretches from the most unmonitored variety of English, say BEV, to the regional or supraregional standard spoken in a formal setting by the most educated members of the speech community. As we have said before, no individual is likely to possess the full breadth of the spectrum but, depending on his socioeconomic class, his sex, his age and his education, he would encompass a portion of it. His repertoire would allow him to shift forth and back within the limits of his range so as to adjust his speech to the particulars of a given setting. It is this type of adjustment that we refer to as code-shifting and the effectiveness of the shifting depends on the range of the speaker's repertoire: the broader the range the more effective the code-shifting and the more effective it is, the greater the speaker's access to a number of different roles within his society.

Let us now assume that an English teacher in a ghetto school has among her students a child from a family belonging to the lowest socioeconomic class. This child can be expected to possess a verbal repertoire with a quite limited range

somewhere near the vernacular end of the spectrum. It should certainly not be the teacher's objective to eradicate the child's vernacular, since he has used it successfully when communicating with parents and peers and will continue doing so in the future. Rather, it should be her objective to build on the child's vernacular by extending his repertoire range in the direction of monitored or standard speech. In other words, she must be expected to teach the child how to choose those linguistic features that are most appropriate to the school situation. This, however, can only be a gradual process and requires of her a sensibility that she may not possess nor was trained to acquire. It appears then that the teacher would have to be or, at least, to approximate as closely as possible, the person whom we have called the ideal speaker-hearer, that is, one whose verbal repertoire stretches from one end to the other of the potential continuum.

Expanding the repertoire range alone would however not suffice, since the child must acquire the notion of appropriate code-shifting. Otherwise,he might choose one set of features rather than another regardless of the domain in which these features are appropriate. The full measure of appropriateness is hard to achieve as long as the most formal portion of the child's verbal repertoire remains far removed from the intended standard. The teacher can only hope for a gradual progression toward the new code. Thus, by choosing fewer stigmatized features than what he would have chosen otherwise, the child is advancing safely toward the school code end of the continuum.

All this implies, not only that we have to train our teachers along entirely new lines, but also that we cannot expect or desire the homogeneity of verbal interaction that we have been aiming at in the past. The racially, socially and ethnically integrated classroom must allow for a similar degree of linguistic variability to the one that exists outside the school and the teacher's goal can no longer be that all her children speak alike -- and I do not mean tone of voice or other paralinguistic features -- but only that they speak somewhat less different from one another compared to how they spoke at the beginning of the year.

The redefinition of educational goals within our schools and, in particular, within our area of specialization requires of our teachers that, either as a result of a different type of college training or by their own effort, they gain a better grasp of the complexity of the social forces at work in our society and, with it, a new conception of what is linguistically and culturally desirable for our children. These new goals could all be subsumed under one main objective, i.e., the acquisition of communicative competence. If intersocial and intrasocial communication can mean anything at all, it means the ability of assessing unemotionally the nature of speech varieties that our children bring to school and of recognizing the value of code-shifting within everyday's speech events.

Verbal behavior, on the other hand, is not all that communication embraces. Recent studies in paralinguistic and kinesic patterns have revealed the enormous gamut of cultural

features that distinguish one ethnic group from the other. A full understanding of these features and mutual respect for cultural diversity must also become an important part of the communicative experience. Finally, a new look at our entire society will help us understand that societal norms hold together the ethnic diversification in America, not by means of increasing or reducing "the heat under the melting pot" as Hockett has facetiously called the varying degrees of ethnic amalgamation in this country, but by coming to grips with the multi-ethnic heritage which, despite all the fears in political quarters, has never really been much of a national risk.

It is this acquisition of total communicative competence that should represent the top priority among our educational goals in order to promote greater interethnic and intraethnic interaction whose full significance we as teachers should be the first to understand.

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